

GREAT ACHIEVEMENTS

Turtle whisperer enables breeding miracle in Graz.



Peter Praschag with his "Alligator Snapper" (Photo: Gerhild Pirker)

Directly from a soup pot came the Indian narrow-headed soft shell turtle rescued by Styrian Peter Praschag. 15 years of breeding at last was successful.

Eight pairs of eyes are peeking out of the sand, as they wait for a fish to swim by. Then comes the fastest tongue in the World, with a mission to take in its prey, too fast for us to even see.

"For now we are still catching the fish for them, the smallest are less than one centimeter long", tells us Zoologist Peter Praschag. Already the new little Indian narrow-headed soft shell turtles are a lot of work for "Turtle Island" employees, in Graz. Perhaps also because amongst them is a Gourmet expert: "One of the eight young turtles wants to be fed very small pieces of fish with tweezers, and loves canned fish."

The soup pot was ready

The fact that these eight little reptiles exist at all is a combination between: a miracle, passion, coincidence and hard work; and about that we have to go back in time to the year 1999 in Northern India: At the Brahmaputra river where Praschag received a tip from a local fisherman that a woman had just bought the only Indian narrow-headed soft shell turtle at the market. He was able to find out where this person lived and quickly was on his way to her house on a rickshaw. He made it to the woman's house just in time: on the kitchen's stove-top the soup pot stood ready.



Peter Praschag and his team. They protect, raise, study and breed many turtle species. The project is financed entirely by donations. (Photo: Yael Eszl)

“The very edge of the turtle’s shell is considered a delicacy, and that is why fisherman hunt them. They also often get illegally imported into China” explains the Styrian man. For this reason, and also because their natural habitats get destroyed by ongoing construction projects, they are near extinction. “It is hard to tell how many specimens are still alive today.” For this reason the Zoologist decided to save the, at the time 2-year-old “Chitra”, and legally exported her to Austria.

After 15 years it finally worked this fall

Time and time again Praschag drove back to the fish market: “Looking for male turtles, getting permits, making sure the turtles would survive the journey back here and then getting them acclimated to the new environment, was a complicated and difficult task.” And after 15 years of raising the turtle until it was old enough, the joy was that much greater when it finally worked this fall: “This is the biggest acknowledgment for us! For years we’ve been trying over and over.” Otherwise only one zoo, in San Diego (USA) has been successful. In Graz, out of 44 eggs eight survived. “In nature turtles produce more than 300 eggs, and only very little few make it.” In the future they are expecting more offsprings. With the goal is to bring them back to their natural habitat.



One of the eight youngsters of the “Indian narrow-headed soft shell turtles”. In nature they live in the rivers of India, Pakistan or Bangladesh. (Photo: Peter Praschag)

His first word as a child was “Kroti”

Where does Praschag get all his energy from? “My father had turtles and my first word was “Kroti”*. As a child I didn’t eat a meal without a turtle next to me. When I was four years old, I already knew I wanted to study zoology.” And that is what he did. Through his commitment and dedication, he has opened four “Turtle Island” locations throughout Styria that are home to the largest number of turtle species world-wide. And in the future, they would like to be able to open the sanctuaries for the public to visit them. “We are still looking for investors”.

* In German the word turtle is Schildkröten and so Kröti is often how a child is first able to say turtle in Austria.

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